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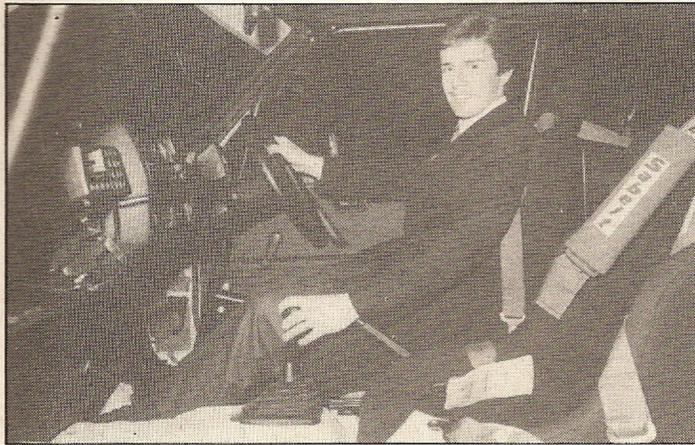
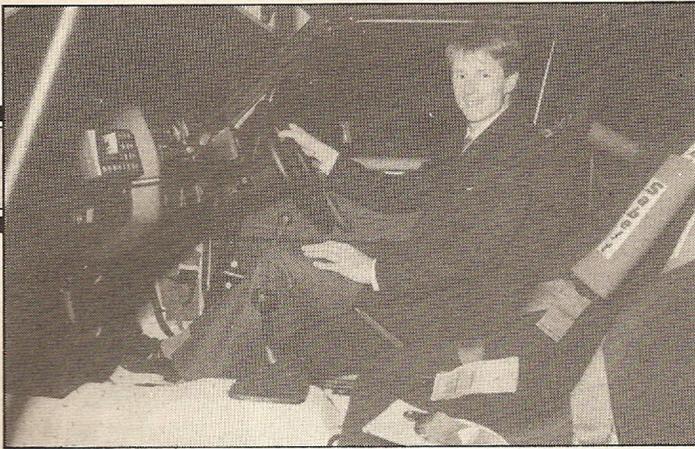
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4WD shoot-out Peugeot 205 T16 v MG Metro 6R4



Opportunity knocks

Art Markus gets to know the Volkswagen Junior Rally Team and drives Simon Davison's immaculately prepared 170bhp Golf GTI

"There are always companies willing to back top drivers", said John Meszaros, Volkswagen UK Marketing Manager, when the Volkswagen Junior Rally Team was introduced to the press for the first time.

"What we want to do is help four young rally drivers achieve their rallying ambition and prove their ability. We believe this kind of help is the only way British rally drivers are going to reach the top."

Meszaros touched on a problem that is becoming of increasing concern to serious observers of rallying; the ever-widening gap between the grass roots of rallying at club level and the stratospheric heights of the international sport. Unfortunately, only very few have any influence over the apparently out-of-control development of a technological war in top-level rallying, and even fewer seem inclined to do anything about it.

It is not very many years ago that the British clubman could start his premier home event, the RAC Rally, in a car that at least *looked* the equal of Mikkola's, Blomqvist's, or Vatanen's. If he was wealthy enough, his machine –

provided it was the ubiquitous Ford Escort – could virtually *be* the same. This, surely was one of the unique appeals of rallying. It offered the chance of competing against the giants of the sport, and on what could be perceived as more-or-less equal terms.

That fond illusion has been comprehensively shattered in the last few years. The average clubman can no longer build a works replica of an Audi quattro S1, Lancia S4, or Peugeot 205 T16, no matter how deep his pockets – see page 70. If one were to equate rallying to racing, it is as if nothing exists between Formula One and FF1600!

The irony of course is that while the supercars may be doing untold harm to the long-term future and prosperity of rallying, the public at large loves them, and turns out in huge numbers to see them perform, leading to concern that a major crowd disaster is looking not just likely, but virtually inevitable. The consequences do not bear thinking about, but one thing is certain: control of the sport, seemingly so lacking at present from within, would quickly pass to those without.

Of course, the gap between club and

international rallying is not just one of finance and technology. It is becoming increasingly difficult for even the most promising young drivers to bridge that gap. That is why the establishment of the Volkswagen Junior Rally Team is so important, and laudable.

A quick recap, for those who may have missed the announcement of the Volkswagen Junior Rally Team in the weekly press: the team comprises four young drivers and their co-drivers, each representing one of the home territories, and they have been provided with identical Group A Golf GTIs, complete with Volkswagen Transporter, service barge and trailer. They are to compete in the Marlboro National Rally Championship, with the added incentive that the most successful of the four crews will get a full works-backed drive in the 1986 Lombard RAC Rally in November. Not counting the further support from Shell Oils

Making some clockwise introductions . . . The VAG Junior Team from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. In action, Simon Davison about to attack a grassy verge, disdainfully witnessed by our circuit-loving author.



Volkswagen Junior Rally Team

Shell Oils
MICHELIN

Hella

Hella

Hella

C794 CYX

Hella



UK (fuels and lubricants), Michelin (tyres), Sachs (suspension dampers), Hella (lights), Recaro (seats) and Ronal (alloy wheels), the operation is said to be costing VAG UK some £250,000 – a figure which seems to us not in the least exaggerated.

Not surprisingly, there was no shortage of applicants when the scheme was announced late in '85; over 350 aspiring young rally drivers were in the queue. The selection panel was concerned not only with a driver's record, and with his potential, but also with his ability as an ambassador for the sport and, by inference, Volkswagen itself. It seems to have succeeded.

On their very first event, the Skip Brown Rally in February, the team scored a remarkable success when the experienced Simon Davison, representing England, came in sixth overall, winning Group A by a comfortable margin in icy, difficult conditions.

And on a final session in Scotland the week before the Skip Brown, at which several members of the specialist press were in attendance, all eight Junior Team members acquitted themselves very well in the PR role – a factor which plays such an important part in a driver's future success these days. There was not a mumbler or a floor-gazer among them as they told us how grateful they were, how great the cars were, etc.

Of course, it is not surprising that the David Sutton Motorsport prepared Group A Golf GTIs met with their approval, when you consider what most of them had been driving immediately before.

Welshman Steve Davies' rallying past encompasses the inevitable Escort in 1300 and RS2000 forms, Davies winning the Welsh Division One Championship in the latter during 1983. In 1984, he became the youngest-ever driver to win a *Motoring News*/BTRDA round. In 1985, Davies and co-driver Nicky Grist abandoned the RS2000 in favour of a Vauxhall Nova for the Nova Challenge, but their efforts were largely thwarted by mechanical problems, and little success was achieved. For Davies, as for the other drivers, selection for the Volkswagen Junior Team was a Godsend, boosting a career that might otherwise have been running out of impetus.

Northern Ireland's Robin Phillips' story

In his new steed, Simon Davison successfully began the defence of his National Group A crown by winning the class and finishing sixth overall on the recent Skip Brown Rally.

begins with a Fiesta XR2 in 1982, which was quickly supplanted by a Mini, with which he came second in the Northern Ireland Sprint Championship. The Mini was replaced by an RS2000 for '84, but after only two events Robin turned to rallying with a Group B Talbot Samba, scoring some noteworthy successes with this machine in '84, and, in Group A form, in 1985. Phillips' co-driver is Bobby Willis.

Perhaps the man to benefit most from his selection is Scotsman Callum Guy, whose previous rally steed was a Hillman Avenger. On the occasions when this worthy machine was able to meet Guy's perhaps unreasonable demands, some amazing results were achieved, including eighth overall and second in class on the '85 Scottish, and second overall on the Festival Rally. More often, though, the

"He's got an old head on young shoulders"

Fred Henderson

cars fragility, or over-enthusiasm on the part of the driver, resulted in retirement. Ashley Strachan will be co-driving for Guy, and if he can temper some of his driver's fiery Scots temperament, these two could spring a few surprises.

Hottest tip for success, though, must be Englishman Simon Davison, with Dave Nicholson. Quite apart from his extensive front-wheel drive experience, Davison is the present Group A Shell Oils/Autosport British National RAC Rally Champion, a feat he will be hoping to repeat in this year's Marlboro-supported Championship. One could possibly accuse the selection panel of hedging their bets on this one, as Davison has already demonstrated that he has the ability, and the connections, to make it on his own – he will also be driving one of Bill Blydenstein's well sorted and reliable Nissan 240RSs on the Open Rally Championship. However, he is determined to make the most of his Volkswagen opportunity, and indeed, he

amply vindicated the panel's judgement on the Skip Brown Rally.

Davison's comparatively tender years bely his experience. His career started in 1982 in an Escort 1300, in which five events were attempted. The following year Davison tackled the short-lived Escort Turbo Championship, tasting both success and failure over two seasons; he is no stranger to powerful front-wheel drive cars. Last year he used a Vauxhall Astra GTE in the National Rally Championship, placing first in class on four occasions, and second on three – a performance good enough to win the Group A crown.

Fellow Durham rally enthusiast, the vastly experienced Fred Henderson, who, following a long and fruitful rally driving career, is currently the manager of Colway Tyres' highly successful motor sport venture, has followed Simon's progress with interest. "He's obviously very committed. He has occasionally surprised me with his speed. Of course, this will be a make-or-break year for him. He is obviously a FWD man – you've got to be tidy with them". A thoughtful pause. . . "Yes, he's got potential. Not an international superstar, perhaps, but" – another pause – "A Russell Brookes maybe.

"Of course, the reason he seems so good at the moment is that there is no-one good around him – not many of them really think about that."

That is perhaps the single quality that sets Davison apart from the other Volkswagen Junior Rally Team members, and indeed from many of the countless other aspiring young rally drivers in Britain; his thoughtful, almost studious approach. "He's got an old head on young shoulders", as Henderson puts it.

During that final Scottish test session before the Skip Brown Rally, CCC rode shotgun with each of the four drivers on a two-way blast along a mock-up special stage. Narrow, lethally slippery with ice and hard-packed snow, and with a rock-strewn stream running parallel with it, the stage was a potential minefield for four young rally drivers, barely in their twenties, eager to impress. One combination of corners in particular, right in the middle incorporating a low bridge, seemed purpose-built to punish the unwary and the over-confident: the stone parapets of



the bridge being just the right height to catch and pulverise an expensive Ronal wheel. That nobody so much as scratched his allocated car is a tribute to the skill and judgement of all four.

However, even on such a limited acquaintance, Simon Davison's edge over the rest was immediately apparent, to no-one's great surprise. After all, his most recent rally machine, a Group A Astra GTE, is much closer to the Golf than a Group A Samba, Nova, or Hillman Avenger. Nonetheless, Davison impressed as the only man to really impose himself on the car in the trying conditions. Not entirely a fair comparison, perhaps, and certainly not one that is intended to reflect on the abilities of the other three. But Davison remains our tip for the top. His performances in the Blydenstein-prepared Nissan should be of great interest – especially in the light of what has already been achieved in this type of car by David Llewellyn and Mark Lovell.

Leading up to their first event, all the Golf drivers commented on how easy the Sutton-prepared GTEs were to drive. We were curious to experience this for ourselves, and so it was that Simon Davison recently presented his car at a Siberian test venue for us to try.

Each car represents a sizeable, £25,000 chunk of Volkswagen's quarter-million pound investment, but that is undoubtedly reflected in David Sutton's immaculate preparation. Interestingly, it is exactly the same sum mentioned in connection with Alan Minshaw's Demon Tweaks Group A racer, as sampled by us in '85 (*Day Tripper CCC*, November '85), a car prepared by Andy Rouse to similar standards. In fact the two cars, while wildly different in function, are in fact remarkably similar, especially in as much as they immediately make a driver feel at ease.

We quickly became acclimatised to Minshaw's racer, and so it was with Davison's rally car. When buckled into the immensely reassuring six-point Sabelt harness and superb Recaro seat, one is confronted with a Volkswagen Motorsport three-spoke wheel and a deceptively standard-looking dashboard. Thoughtful touches abound, like the beautifully fabricated clutch footrest, and the slightly raised platform beneath the pedals to compensate for the lack of sound

deadening material and carpet.

Off to the driver's left, where they can be monitored by the co-driver as well, are auxiliary gauges for oil temperature, fuel contents and coolant temperature. A Halda rally computer sits directly in front of the co-driver, while a bank of fuses occupies the lower part of the dash in easy reach of either man. A beautifully-constructed Matter roll-cage closely follows the inside contours of the cockpit, and doubtless makes a considerable contribution to structural rigidity.

Starting the engine is simply a matter of turning the key. It fires up readily, and gives

Immaculate as ever, the cars have all been professionally prepared by David Sutton Motorsport. Below: Tasting FWD for the first time, Callum Guy undertook some intensive training before making his first official appearance on the Skip Brown Rally.

off an aggressive bark, but is impressively untemperamental. Make no mistake though: it has real bite – a solid 170bhp's worth. This is achieved with little apparent loss of tractability; it will pull smoothly, if unspectacularly, from around 3000rpm, and with real urgency from around 4000rpm. Maximum power is produced at 7200rpm, although that became largely academic during the course of our test, as the tachometer was malfunctioning, the needle simply swinging wildly back and forth across the dial. "That's on the list of things to look at", explained Davison. "The car hasn't been touched since it finished the Skip Brown Rally."

That factor also accounted for a rather unresponsive brake pedal. The brakes, AP ventilated discs up front, standard discs at the rear, with Ferodo DS11 pads all round, needed to be warmed before giving of their best, but there remained the problem of a somewhat





soggy pedal. "It just needs some new pads and a bleed", avowed Davison. "The brakes are normally brilliant."

Gearchanges through the strengthened close-ratio box can be accomplished with lightning speed, the engagement of fifth when third is required being the occasional penalty for haste and unfamiliarity when changing up, out of second; the movement from the third/fourth plane to fifth being satisfyingly small.

You can be sure Davison does not have that problem. But the factor that surprised and impressed us most of all was the Golf's aplomb when riding bumpy terrain, both when Davison was acting chauffeur, and during our own spell at the wheel. Let us admit here and now that the writer is a confirmed circuit man. It is rare to have to compensate for a bumpy surface on most circuits, but conversely, awkwardly-placed bumps on a circuit have to be treated with considerable respect; witness the notorious, and since smoothed, bump on the apex of Church corner at Thruxton, the cause of many a heart flutter, and sometimes worse.

Initially we were aghast when Davison simply tore over bumpy ground – apparently oblivious to the surface conditions – without so much as easing off the throttle. But this well-behaved Golf simply shrugged off such treatment. And yet both the handling and roadholding are impeccable, the car steadfastly refusing to spin despite our combined best efforts to upset it; turning in very late and hard on an ice patch; clipping a raised grassy verge on the inside: bouncing

Steppe-ing out . . . no matter what the angle of attack, the Golf behaved impeccably during our 'Siberian' tests.

onto two wheels. Davison, it must be said, got the car to adopt some lurid angles, but it still refused to let him down. If only the term 'user-friendly' hadn't been done to death . . .

Most of our driving took place on ice and hard-packed snow, on which the Golf showed superb stability, and a remarkable degree of traction. However, on some sections, clear patches of tarmac showing through the ice gave a convincing demonstration of both car and driver.

It is well-known that conditions of alternating traction and loss of traction are the most difficult for a powerful, FWD, LSD-equipped car to cope with, usually resulting in snatching of the steering wheel and directional instability. Again, the Golf shrugged-off these conditions, the power-assisted steering resisting any tendency to snatch or wander as the wheels alternately scabbled for grip and then suddenly bit.

In these conditions, Davison also gave us a valuable insight into his own approach, skilfully modulating the throttle to ease the strain on the driveshafts due to rapid torque reversals taking place as the wheels gripped and then spun wildly. Is it just coincidence that he was the only Volkswagen Junior Rally Team member not to suffer driveshaft problems on the team's debut event?

It is remarkable how careful preparation can turn a production car of modest capabilities

and pretensions into an effective competition vehicle. Who would believe, for example, that the grossly understeering Rover Vitesse could be turned into a hugely successful race and, to a lesser extent, rally car. What happens, though, when the basic production car has, by popular consensus, few, if any, flaws? It seems that good preparation can make an average car good, but it can only make a good car better.

The one question left unanswered by our test is: 'What next?' What will happen to Callum Guy, Robin Phillips, Steve Davies and Simon Davison after one of them has tackled the RAC Rally? Between now and the start of the '87 season, Volkswagen UK will have some extraordinarily difficult decisions to make, always assuming of course that sources of finance are finite, and choices do have to be made.

Naturally, VAG's motives aren't entirely magnanimous. But if one, or indeed all, of these young drivers proves to be outstandingly good, will Volkswagen UK allow him to be snatched by a rival manufacturer? Or will VW continue to support his career, possibly through the Audi side of the organisation? And if so, will the Junior Rally Team be disbanded?

Intriguing questions, to which John Meszaros was unable – genuinely, we feel sure – to give any answers.

One thing is for sure; for the Englishman, the Irishman, the Scotsman and the Welshman (there, we had to slip that one in somewhere!), 1986 will be a momentous year.

